

CIA and Watergate: Multiple-choice truth

By Jim Squires

WASHINGTON—Spun in the gold thread of rumor mills and the silver arm of phantom spiders, the tales spread like steam from the sewers and fountains from the keyholes.

They are born both of fact spoken by the innocent who want to help and fiction whispered by the guilty who seek to confuse.

These often-told, frequently embellished, and as yet unproven stories are purished in the tortured brains of reporters, politicians, and conspiracy freaks who believe the full story of the scandal which felled a President has yet to surface.

FEW HAVE ever appeared in print as fact, or for that matter, ever will. But they have taken on lives of their own and their newsworthiness is hardly gauge of money and manpower spent in pursuit of them.

As simple as homemade sin or bizarre enough to test the wildest imagination, these tales almost always center around "it"—"it" being what "they" were trying to cover up with all that lying, and "they" being whoever was lying at the time.

With the investigations into the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], the bookiest of all spooky things in Washington, has come a whole new rash of tales, leads, and tips—all of which, of course, lead to "it."

The principal characters in most of them are former President Richard Nixon, who bears the ultimate responsibility for keeping "it" secret; Richard Helms, former CIA director and now U.S. ambassador to Iran, whose accounts of his own participation are as plentiful as Mother Goose nursery rhymes, and ex-CIA man E. Howard Hunt, whose failure to get anyone to believe him may make him one of the most mysterious characters in American history.

One of the hottest "new" scenarios is an old one. The real reason the White House tried so hard to cover up the Watergate burglary is:

The Hunt Connection—A close personal relationship developed between Hunt and Nixon when Hunt was the CIA political liaison in the planning of the Bay of Pigs invasion and Nixon was heading the National Security Council as Vice President in 1960.

SUPPORTING evidence is plentiful. In a conversation five days after the Watergate break-in, H. R. Haldeman, Nixon's chief of staff, tells the President that the CIA and Helms will cooperate in coverup efforts because "it tracks back to the Bay of Pigs and . . . the whole Hunt problem."

At least one Watergate-connected lawyer has a piece of brush for this fire. His client, he discreetly tells associates, lied about the CIA because Nixon was more afraid of the "Hunt problem" than any other.

And there are numerous witnesses who were involved in the Bay of Pigs affair who say they are sure Hunt briefed the then-Vice President Nixon several times. Some say he also briefed President John F. Kennedy, who was let in on the planned invasion—to Nixon's dismay, shortly before the 1960 Presidential election.

But the connection runs into trouble when: [1] Nixon denies it; [2] Hunt denies it, and [3] nobody who was connected with the Bay of Pigs operation can say they remember seeing Hunt and Nixon in the same meeting.

The list of "ifs" is endless. Some are epic.

In the same conversation which spawned The Hunt Connection, there are indications that CIA Director Helms was more than willing to go along with the coverup. But he didn't, or at least he says he didn't.

One line being pursued by some fairly credible investigators is that Helms indeed was willing to go along. This is supported by sworn testimony that Helms ordered other CIA officials to withhold evidence from the FBI and indications that he committed perjury on more than one occasion.

Even more damning is evidence that the agency was being kept informed of Hunt's activities in the White House, both by Hunt and by another member of the Watergate break-in crew, Eugenio Martinez, who was still on a CIA retainer.

After all, didn't Helms once approve a \$20,000 loan from agency funds for Hunt and didn't he help Hunt get a job with Robert R. Mullen & Co., a public relations firm in Washington that served as a CIA cover?

But if all that is true, why was Helms fired by Nixon? Why didn't the CIA ultimately take responsibility for the break-in? Wasn't it CIA resistance that helped uncover attempts to obstruct justice?

One high-ranking CIA official, who was in a position to know, offers this explanation: Helms was fired for refusing to claim the Watergate burglary team and to use secret CIA funds to buy their silence.

"RICHARD HELMS is the shrewdest man in Washington," says the official. "He would automatically do everything he could to make the White House believe he was cooperating and at the same time figure out a way not to do it. But when he got the call from the President asking him to use the money, there was nothing left to do but refuse. That call is what they're trying to cover up."

That's "it," all right. Helms became "Deep Throat" for Washington Post reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, feeding information to the newspaper personally or thru Robert Bennett, a Mullen company official in the pay of the CIA.

Did the CIA official hear the call? No. Did Helms tell him about it? No.

"Hell, no," says an associate. "All Helms was trying to do was protect the agency. What Helms was really afraid of is what is happening now. Investigations of the CIA uncovering violations of its charter. What the CIA feared most is that everyone would find out it was carrying out domestic spying."

The CIA has obviously been trying to